Commissioned History Writing. Is There a Future?

by Margaret Kowald

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There is a future in commissioned history writing although many issues need to be considered in giving such an opinion.

Commissioned histories are researched, written and produced by authors who enter into contractual arrangements with a commissioning body. Although such history may take many forms such as books, reports, pamphlets, photographic records, educational kits, historical museum and library exhibitions, recordings and films, and the work may be published or remain in-house, commissioned histories generally fall into the category of 'public history'. Commissions typically come from shire councils, Government departments and agencies, schools, private companies and clubs, and families.

Commissioned histories differ, therefore, from other historical writing in which the author enters into contractual arrangements with a publisher. In the latter case, the author writes on a topic of his or her choosing and, while the interpretation is by its very nature subjective, the work can be written and produced objectively. With this difference come vexing questions for the historian who is commissioned. Can the work be objective? 'You might be the piper but on another's payroll, what tunes do you get to play?'[1] More specifically, what can be said objectively about those people who are living and perhaps directly responsible for funding the project? Is there a danger that the only histories produced will be of those organisations able to afford such a project?

Notwithstanding such concerns, the limited publishing opportunities for non-commissioned work and the growing market for commissioned histories has led to increased employment opportunities for public historians. With an increased interest by Australians in their past and the aging of Australia as a nation, opportunities for researching and writing Australian history have increased. The trend to integrate community history with working-

class life, and to reclaim the lives of women, has influenced the focus of many Australian works.[2] The idea of place, of a region or city, has also gained its own kind of persona in studies.

Public history writing was also given a boost in the late 1970s, as the expansion of the universities came to an end and the employment prospects of history PhDs began to deteriorate. Young historians, locked out from academic employment, perceived a role in potential new heritage business, social history museums, the family history boom and the burgeoning interest in local history.[3]

Subsequently, history departments, firstly overseas and more recently in Australia, began to train their students for non-academic careers. The University of Queensland has courses and subjects pertaining to public and applied history, Griffith University has established a Queensland Studies Centre and there are various other tertiary institutions in Australia which offer applied history courses. Specific studies are being offered such as family, heritage and environmental history (including the built and natural environment), and advanced skills in data and computer methods, writing and editing.

Thus, experience combined with postgraduate qualifications in public and applied history have provided traditional historical skills for public historians. Historians working for archives, museums, and some government and business offices, however, should also strive to learn technical skills. The demands of the marketplace cannot be arrogantly ignored, for employers of public historians expect some level of technical proficiency. A knowledge of the preservation process and manuscripts conservation is an advantage and historians should stay abreast with computer applications.

Such training leads to experimental styles. No longer is there an outpouring of detailed narratives and endless lists of names. The newer strands of writing seek to write on thematic lines. The slice approach may be taken by recreating the past at set chronological intervals. This was popular in bicentenary publications. Historians may look at history from different angles; from the bottom up so that for the first time the ordinary person has a voice; or the historian might take a small locality and look outwards placing it in the context of the world.

The effect of the public history movement has not been without concerns as noted by historian Graeme Davison:

> Academics may perceive public historians as mere outworkers in the history factory, a group of menials turning out goods of inferior quality at a faster pace and a lower rate of pay. The role of the public historian is indeed quite distinct from that of the academic and the absence of tenure and the guarantees of scholarly independence traditionally associated with universities may create ethical and

> economic pressures of a kind rarely experienced by academics. On the other hand:, the public historian may enjoy the compensating pleasure of seeing his or her work translated into decisions that affect the 'real world'.[4]

WHO WRITES COMMISSIONED HISTORIES?

This is a contentious issue for currently, commissioned histories are being written by a variety of people both trained and untrained in historical research and writing. Those with formal history training include academics, independent freelance historians and full-time professionals working for heritage, government and private agencies. Those without formal history training include journalists, social scientists, academics other than those from the history discipline, people retired from an organisation who are invited to write the organisation's history, and interested amateurs.

Increasingly, there are people in the community with Honours, Masters or Doctorates in Australian History who are pursuing public history research and writing as their full time career. Academics who lecture in history are also authors of commissioned history projects. With an academic salary for support and a desire to increase one's list of publications, academics who write commissioned history seem to have the best of both worlds. They have the financial scope to undercut freelance historians for projects and while this continues, it could be argued that they are doing the public history industry and themselves a disservice. When students who aspire to employment in the freelance world see dismal, poorly paid employment prospects, student numbers, and thus the academic's own livelihood, could evaporate.

But the teaching of public history in the academy is changing. As historians working in the public domain become equally academically qualified, indeed more so, because of their specialised training and work experience, public historians are taking on teaching jobs at tertiary level. Such cross fertilisation is a healthy sign. Indeed, as freelance historian Grace Karskens has commented:

> The separation of the two arms of the discipline is clearly nonsensical, and detrimental besides, for they do share common roots, concerns and goals.[5]

What role should interested academics play, especially those who lecture in the public history field? To what extent should they undertake commissioned work? A suggestion has been that they;

> might enhance their role and status as consultants, whether remunerated or not, to government agencies, heritage organisations, businesses and the media.[6]

Academic historian Geoffrey Bolton has suggested that academics should tackle important tasks that do not attract commissions and leave commissioned work for public historians.[7] Academics might also become more active in coordinating and facilitating projects, negotiating employment opportunities for history graduates, and in counselling students about career paths. To what extent they should undertake commissioned histories might become a matter of personal conscience. If they do, however, payment should be commensurate with that of the freelance world.

The money issue also applies to the category of untrained historians who undertake historical writing. A history of a particular organisation might never have been written had it not been for someone, untrained, but also unpaid, writing the history. This does not necessarily present a problem. We need potted histories and accurate information about a broad range of topics. And we value the collections of local historical societies. Indeed, more local history is written in Australia than any other single historical genre.

What can be disputed, however, is the scenario of a commissioning body which has the finances, commissioning (and paying) a person whose primary credential is a long association with that organisation. As a result, there is a tendency for the insider to gloss over unpleasantries or perhaps build them up out of all proportion. The author is poorly equipped to understand the larger societal setting in which the story takes place and is generally untrained and inexperienced in historical research, methodology and writing of this kind. Nor has the author the experience to meet writing deadlines. Even the best editorial assistance cannot repair poor quality research and writing.

Some people, however, argue strongly that only those people from within an industry can write about that industry. Peter Charlton, of the *Courier Mail,* stated at the Queensland Historians Institute's meeting, 'Only Historians Can Do History?',[8] that he would want a journalist with some historical training rather than an historian, to write a history of a newspaper. Perhaps this is a poor example because of the closeness of journalism to the literary world but journalists do not necessarily have sufficient knowledge of Australian history to place a history of newspapers in the correct historical context. Indeed, it was Charlton who, at the opening of the Royal Historical Society's 'Windows on the War' Day,[9] told of the young journalist assigned to cover the World War II anniversary celebrations of the Pacific who did not know that Milne Bay was associated with World War II.

THE COMMISSIONING BODY

Geographer Amos Rapoport commenting on the environment wrote, 'It is clear that no advance can be made with environmental problems without an interested and informed public'.[10] Similarly, without an interested and informed public, no advance can be made in ensuring that trained historians are employed in commissioned history writing. This pertains especially to those who are in control of commissioning a history.

An historical consciousness usually comes from one or a group within the organisation but their choice of the person to research and write the history is of utmost importance. To be suitably qualified requires post-graduate study in history and these qualifications must be fully recognised. Unfortunately it has been difficult, without union backing, to slot public historians into appropriate salary ranges. Should they be in the professional, administrative, scientific or as is often the case, miscellaneous category? While those in authority of such decision-making have the attitude that anyone can do history, the situation is deplorable.

The Queensland Historians Institute, (QHI), formed in 1990 as a professional association for historians in this state, is endeavouring to address the problem by speaking with potential commissioning bodies. There is also a need to educate the public in the most effective way to have public history disseminated in the community. For far too long society has viewed historians as academic teachers who play a relatively marginal role in society. Those in the community practising history have been considered amateurs. Public historians need to raise their profile and make potential employers aware of their existence.

THE COMMISSION

The contents of the written contract can be a saviour for both the historian and the commissioning body. For the author, objectivity, independence and authority are important factors underpinning any project and the contract is the framework within which these can be achieved.

It is essential that historians be allowed full intellectual honesty and integrity. They are sensitive about having their work compromised, modified or abused. They prefer to maintain complete freedom to say what they want, provided their opinions are supported by factual evidence. The process is not always easy. At the same time, the commissioning body needs protection to safeguard its investment in the project. The organisation might not have had any prior publishing experience. The whole process could well be a learning process and a well defined contract will be the linchpin.

Public historians therefore need to develop business skills in the difficult area of tendering for jobs and negotiating contracts. The QHI, with legal advice, has had contract guidelines formulated for its members. Areas covered include time schedules for the project, editorial control, access to records, ancillary assistance, allowances for travel, stationery, photocopying, postage and telephone calls, copyright, arbitration and publication aspects such as the publication taking place within a specified time. In a job with no paid holidays, no company vehicle, no employer sponsored superannuation fund, no facilities such as computers, laser printers, photocopiers and fax machines, and no assured continuity of work especially during recessions and droughts when history projects can be easily postponed, the historian must take all aspects of the commission into account.

Sources are the tools of trade for the historian and accuracy is of utmost importance. Secondary sources are valuable for a working knowledge of the topic but primary sources have unique significance. Numerous inaccuracies have been perpetuated through using only secondary sources and such inaccuracies need correcting. Interpretation and analysis are also part of the process and the historian should read widely enough to gain a feeling of what the material does not contain, as well as the bias which may be therein. For instance, to read the Queensland Government Intelligence and Tourist Bureau publications in the early years of this century, one would think every region of Queensland could grow anything, had a perfectly agreeable climate and had boundless opportunities for millions of people.

Data bases and finding aids quicken the research process. Brian Crozier explained in his article in an *AHA Bulletin* in 1989 that to save generations of researchers from rummaging through the same sources many times over and missing valuable items altogether, historians need to generate data bases and finding aids to access resource and archival collections. Preferably this is achieved by computers or microfiche. He continues;

> Though much of this compilation might be handled by assistants, students or amateurs, historians could take more of a lead in implementing and coordinating resource projects. They alone have an overall understanding of historical context, source materials, likely applications and possible problems. . . . If those wonderful last-century beavers had not calendared British history sources, that field would be in the same indexing fix as Australian history today.[11]

Bibliographies are being published and more finding aids and 'how to' booklets are appearing but much more needs to be done.

Furthermore, it must also be remembered that we present day historians are recreating the past through the eyes of the present and

according to our own imperatives and wisdom. 'The past is also dynamic in the sense that the inhabitants of the past lived in their own present'.[12] Consequently, each generation rewrites its history. The state of historical knowledge must be seen therefore as 'fluctuating through time'.[13]

Planning the research and writing to suit the time frame are most important. Deadlines need to be met and drafts submitted. An editorial board or committee to oversee the project is helpful for both the author and the commissioning body. Consideration needs to be given as to whether a professional editor is to be employed.

A thesis has to satisfy a supervisor and up to three examiners while a commissioned history would want to draw the largest possible readership. The extent is governed by the topic. A shire history would interest those in the shire while a history of a broader geographic area or a broad topic would attract a wider audience. The general reader of the commissioned history, however, should be treated with respect. A critical 'warts and all' assessment is often required and to do otherwise 'can so warp a book that it is dangerous even in its presentation of the facts'.[14]

But there is a problem that since the organisation has put money into printing and publication, and since they are nice people, you want to say nice things about them. This is where professionalism and objectivity are vital. Historians need to be able to stand back and assess the whole. If this involves criticism, so be it.

Submitting the text of a commissioned work, usually on computer disk to a publisher, does not mean that all work on the part of the author ceases. The text and the placement of photographs and captions have to be checked, and the index compiled only after the page numbers have been established. Time is often running out at this stage and there is pressure from the commissioning body. 'Where is the book?' they keep asking. Depending on the terms of the contract, the historian might also be involved with the marketing of the publication.

PERSONAL QUALITIES

Qualifications, experience, the contract and sources are significant aspects but there are also personal qualities which influence the success of a commissioned project.

The ethical issue of confidentiality between the author and those commissioning the project is an important issue. With confidentiality comes trust and credibility and once these are established, people will do their utmost to assist the project. This is very apparent in oral interviews, when people, often requesting that the tape recorder be

turned off, reveal information which can be of enormous help to the overall context of the story. Such comments are often defamatory and cannot be used in the text but they are the glue which holds the story together. While current employees usually hold back on comments because their jobs are at stake, retired and former employees have fewer inhibitions. On this point, it could be argued that an historian from outside the organisation would be told information which, if an insider was writing the history, would never come to light.

Historians must be good communicators — with those from the commissioning body, with interviewees, and with archivists and librarians when information is being sought. Inherent in this quality is the aspect of being a good listener. Historians need to have a high degree of self motivation. The hours are flexible, but without an employer at each research location, there are unlimited opportunities to be elsewhere. Deadline dates, however, loom large in an historian's life and quickly pull one back to reality.

Well organised work habits are essential with respect to time and materials. Thus an efficient filing system is required whether it be in arranging material into folders or rearranging files on computer to more easily access the system. Manning Clark once wrote:

> History is a chaos, rather like the chaos Jehovah knew before he performed his great act of creation. Like Jehovah, all that the historian does is to impose an order on the chaos.[15]

Similarly, our research and writing is often in a state of chaos, but unlike Jehovah, sometimes we do not have the luxury of seven days to get it right.

Historians need to have the ability to make decisions and to be selective. With an overwhelming body of material, culling is important. The material may be very interesting but is it really necessary? You need to ask yourself do I have sufficient examples already? What statistics do I require? And very importantly, am I spending too much time on research? The project needs to keep moving. As English historian John Tosh stated:

> Many historians who have a flair for working on primary sources find the process of composition excruciatingly laborious and frustrating. The temptation is to continue amassing material so that the time of reckoning can be put off indefinitely.[16]

Historians require a high level of tolerance. At times the amount of material available for research is overwhelming, given time constraints. Even Manning Clark found the writing process demanding. In 1976 he wrote of his own work:

> Every volume of a history has to be written at least three and sometimes four times, and, as each volume contains nearly 200:,000 words that means over three quarters of a million words have to be written to get out a volume. A man has to be single-minded to keep going.[17]

Marina Warner, one of Britain's leading feminist historians, was not so sympathetic to non-fiction writers when she wrote:

> With non-fiction, you are essentially providing a service, so you don't have to be particularly skilled, you are merely transmitting knowledge.[18]

It could be argued, conversely, that because a litany of facts by their nature are boring, the writer of non-fiction has to be more aware of holding the reader's interest. There is no doubt that a healthy command of the English language is advisable, indeed some historians have found creative writing courses of benefit. We can only do our best and aspire to emulate others such as Geoffrey Blainey who has been described as

> exhibiting a talent for ordering a mass of material into a clear narrative enlivened by evocative descriptions, a capacity to explain technicalities to a lay reader and a knack of swooping on the detail that illuminated his subject.[19]

Historians require a strong constitution for field trips, lugging heavy books about and for withstanding late nights at the computer. One's research ability must be quick and precise. Historians need to know where to go and to obtain the information as quickly and efficiently as possible. This is where finding aids are invaluable.

Historians need to be reliable. They must be punctual for interviews, and prompt in returning telephone calls, photographs or other material which people have loaned for the project.

Finally in the list of attributes, historians are at a disadvantage if they cannot relate to other professions on their own terms or cannot understand their perspective. With the increase in cultural resource projects especially in the heritage field, public historians are being required to work with architects, anthropologists, archaeologists, geographers, policy analysts, urban planners, economists, lawyers and public administrators. Thus while still promoting their own discipline historians 'must not embrace the confining notion that history offers the only valuable insight into research problems'.[20]

THE FUTURE?

Centenaries, anniversaries and commemorations continue to be celebrated and historians can find employment with such events. The market has expanded with genealogical and family histories, local and heritage studies, and community, school and corporate histories. There has also been some scope for military history, national parks studies and work in social history museums. In particular the Queensland Heritage Act 1992 opens a new era of research on environment and heritage work.

Other legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act to be enacted in Queensland on 19 November 1992 has yet to be tested by historians. Comments following the implementation of such an Act in the United States are worth noting. David Trask wrote in 1989:

> The FOIA hasn't helped very much. Effective use of the [Act] by historians requires great energy and patience because the investigator initially doesn't know what to ask for, and the law exempts many categories of critical records, . . . We hear too much of the successful use of the [Act] by historians, and too little about failures. Lawyers, journalists, and business people can make effective use of [the Act] to retrieve specific bits of information, . . . [but] The Freedom of Information Act in no way substitutes for regular comprehensive release of government records according to an established schedule.[21]

Overseas, there is scope for specialisation of topics. For example, historians in the US might not only be corporate historians, they might also specialise in a field such as aviation or railroads. We cannot be as selective and there are examples of historians in Queensland who have written on a wide range of topics.[22]

Furthermore, US corporations have their own archives and employ historians. In 1975, the Wells Fargo Company set up a history department staffed by professional historians, archivists, museum and exhibit specialists. The company wished to protect the integrity of its name and its history and also felt an obligation as a corporate citizen to preserve community history. Furthermore the company found an increasing need for historical information for advertising, marketing, public relations and personnel matters.[23] The Australian corporate world is neither old enough nor large enough to support such a task force and yet institutions such as banks and mining companies like MIM and BHP have sought to preserve their past.

But is a commissioned history merely a public relations exercise? Certainly the release of a publication will increase the public profile of the organisation. At the same time, however,

> the firm with a competently written history at its disposal is . . . at an advantage because it possesses a dependable memory bank which provides reliable information about how it dealt with crises, survived depressions, made wise decisions, and on occasions committed mistakes which it would do well to avoid in the future.[24]

Increasingly, historians need to be aware of the possibilities of media other than print form. Understanding of the past now comes from a culture that is highly audiovisual and dramatic — through film, television, radio and music. Commissioned history may take new directions and acquire different perspectives but the evidence suggests a positive direction — with a future.

ENDNOTES

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